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# Roma in Bulgaria after 1989/90 – Living Conditions and State Policy

SONJA SCHÜLER

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## **Zusammenfassung**

### **Roma in Bulgarien nach 1989/90 – Lebensbedingungen und Staatspolitik**

Die indisch-stämmigen Roma stellen eine in mehrfacher Hinsicht spezifische „Ethnie“ dar. Die heterogene Großgruppe lebt über etliche europäische und außereuropäische Staaten verstreut und ihre Angehörigen sind mehrheitlich „traditionell“ von Randgruppensein betroffen. Roma sind insbesondere in den südosteuropäischen Ländern mit signifikanten Gesamtbevölkerungsanteilen vertreten.

Am Beispiel Bulgariens, einem Staat mit einem der europaweit größten Gesamtbevölkerungsanteile dieser Ethnie, zeigen sich die ambivalenten Auswirkungen der demokratisch und marktwirtschaftlich orientierten Transformationsprozesse auf breite Segmente dieser Minderheit. Einerseits sichern seit 1990 verankerte Grundrechte und Freiheiten neue Möglichkeiten der Entfaltung ethnokultureller Charakteristika, der Organisation und Artikulation gruppenspezifischer Interessen und der politischen und sozioökonomischen Partizipation. Andererseits hat sich der Randgruppenstatus der Roma in mehrfacher Hinsicht verschärft. Überproportionale Erwerbslosigkeit, drastische Verarmung, eine niedrige Lebenserwartung sowie eine überdurchschnittliche Abhängigkeit vom Wohlfahrtsystem kennzeichnen die Lebensbedingungen der Betroffenen. Der Teufelskreis der Armut zwingt im Rahmen einer armutsbedingten Subkultur zum Leben außerhalb gesellschaftlicher Werte und Normen. Im Rahmen der krisenhaften Wandlungsprozesse haben die Roma auch die begrenzte Akzeptanz ihres gesellschaftlichen Umfeldes verloren. Dies belegen die Verfestigung historischer Negativklischees und die Entfaltung neuer Ausgrenzungs- und Diskriminierungsmechanismen gegen die zunehmend als „soziales Problem“ wahrgenommene Ethnie. Ansätze der ethnospezifischen Interessenorganisation der Roma sind insbesondere auf der parteipolitischen Ebene schwach ausgeprägt und ermöglichen die Einflussnahme auf nationale politische Entscheidungsprozesse bislang nicht.

Zur langfristigen Angleichung der Lebenschancen dieser Minderheit sind die von der politisch-institutionellen Ebene ausgehende Schaffung von Entwicklungsmöglichkeiten in den Schlüsselbereichen Bildung und Erwerbswesen, die Bekämpfung von Diskriminierung und die Förderung politischer Partizipation grundlegende Voraussetzungen. Die staatliche Politik gegenüber den Roma zeichnete sich bis Ende der neunziger Jahre durch die außenpolitische Demonstration von Reformbereitschaft und die faktische Umsetzung einzelner Symbolmaßnahmen mit unzureichender Bedürfnisorientierung aus. Erst innerhalb der vergangenen Jahre wurden im Zuge der EU-Beitrittsvorbereitungen erste problemorientierte politische Maßnahmen eingeleitet, deren praktischer Nutzen sich noch erweisen muss.

Sollten die nicht nur in Bulgarien, sondern in zahlreichen Staaten mit vergleichbaren Problemen dringend benötigten Reformansätze in ihren Ansätzen stecken bleiben, so werden breite Segmente der Roma-Bevölkerung langfristig am Rande eines erweiterten EU-Bereichs verbleiben, innerhalb dessen sie die numerisch größte ethnische Minderheit darstellen – mit weitreichenden politischen und sozioökonomischen Folgen.

*Roma, Bulgarien, Südosteuropa, Marginalität, Volksgruppe, Minderheitenpolitik*

## **Abstract**

The Roma are in many ways a unique people. This heterogeneous “inter-group-community” originates in north-western India. It consists of many subgroups which can be differentiated according to cultural, religious, territorial, historical, socio-economic and other characteristics. Its identity is multidimensionally diverse. Roma groups moved to Europe hundreds of years ago and the Roma are the continent’s largest ethnic minority. According to estimates, roughly 8 million Roma live in many European countries. Being a transnational minority, the Roma do not have a common homeland which could serve as a protecting power. The Roma have never controlled significant resources. Since their arrival in Europe, large segments of this ethnic minority have been living more or less on the margins of their societies. Social rejection and exclusion by the dominant populations as well as self-exclusion are historical determinants of their living conditions. Especially in the former socialist countries of Southeast Europe, Roma comprise large parts of the entire populations.

The developments in post-socialist Bulgaria show that the collapse of socialism and the democratisation processes had very ambiguous consequences for large segments of the region’s Roma. During socialism, repressive measures aimed at this minority’s complete assimilation and forced its economic integration. Nevertheless, Roma benefited from permanent employment, regular wages, social benefits and from comparatively better opportunities for education. Since 1989/90, new constitutional rights and individual freedoms were institutionalised and the socialist repressions were abolished. Marginal groups have equal rights to develop their cultural identities, to organize and articulate individual and common interests and to seize new opportunities for social and political participation. Yet, the transformation processes brought new hardship – especially for the Roma. Unemployment rates above average, extreme impoverishment, increasing segregation in the spheres of education and housing, severe health problems, new forms of discrimination and a growing dependency on social benefits characterize the living conditions of this minority today. Large segments of the Roma population are trapped in a vicious circle of poverty and exclusion. Their marginal status has drastically sharpened which also means that the social distance between them and their social environment enlarged. Pauperisation forces many Roma to live beyond social norms and values, also by making use of illegal strategies for survival. The historical stereotypes vis-à-vis the Roma seem to come true as a self-fulfilling prophecy. The image of the irresponsible, criminal Gypsy determines this minority’s social perception even more than before 1989.

Although the Roma seize the opportunity for political participation with ethno-specific political parties, they did not manage to get enough support for an effective political representation on the national level. Many different loosely structured, poorly organized and elite driven parties compete for the votes of the Roma but in fact, the Roma's national political mobilization has been unsuccessful.

The reasons for the deterioration of the Roma's living conditions are complex. General socio-economic consequences of "modernization" and the transformation processes, a historically low social status, historical shortcomings in the sphere of education, "traditional" stereotypes and prejudices vis-à-vis this people, socio-economic and cultural mechanisms of self-exclusion and consequences of the Roma minority's heterogeneity have an important bearing on the situation.

Notwithstanding this ethnic group's increasing marginalization, the Roma still did not become the focus of a coherent national state policy for the improvement of their living conditions. The negative image of the Gypsy is not the only reason for this deficit. The standard of living in the country is still low and the Bulgarian state has to solve many different transitional problems at the same time – including the fulfilment of the European Union's stability criteria.

Without equal development opportunities in the spheres of education and employment and without a real combat of discrimination large segments of the Roma population will keep on living on the margins for quite a long time. Not only in Bulgaria but also in many other countries where the situation is similar. The social and economic consequences are considerable.

*Roma, Bulgaria, Southeast Europe, marginalization, ethnic group, minority policy*

## Roma in Southeast Europe

Since the collapse of socialism the transformation countries of Eastern and South east Europe are exposed to manifold changes. Democratic rights and freedoms have been adopted and institutions that are conducive to constructive relations with ethnic minorities have been established. Labour markets and employment conditions have changed. Public welfare systems collapsed and new social dissimilarities occurred. The regime changes provoked many hopes and expectations. They related to the improvement of the standard of living, the guarantee of rights and freedoms and a peaceful coexistence of individuals and groups having equal rights and opportunities. These hopes and expectations have only partly been fulfilled.

The Roma who are also known as gypsies, *Zigeuner*, *tsiganes* or *cigani* comprise a very unusual group not only within the transformation countries but also in the global context. In the Romani language, the mother tongue of many Roma-communities throughout Europe, *Roma* means *men*. The terms *gypsies*, *Zigeuner*, *tsiganes* and *cigani* are originally names which have been given to them by their social environment. They refer to the Roma's supposed origins. *Gypsies* is derived from *Egyptians* whereas *Zigeuner*, *cigani* refer to a religious group of the Byzantine Empire called *athinganoi* (which means *untouchables*) (REEMTSMA 1996). Although there are Roma who call themselves gypsies/cigani, many members of this group prefer to be referred to as *Roma* because the former terms are "traditionally" connected with many

negative stereotypes – suffice it to mention the image of the lazy, dirty gypsy. The group does not have an ethnic name which is commonly accepted but international institutions (the European Union, the OSCE, the World Bank, the UN etc.) use the collective name *Roma*. The majority of the people I interviewed in the course of my field research in countries of Southeast Europe considered the term *cigani* as a devaluating name and identified themselves as *Roma* and/or as members of their own subgroups (SCHÜLER 2005). In this article I will use *Roma* as a collective name.

The Roma, whose historical roots are located in north-western India, already appeared in Europe about 700 years ago. As a transnational minority which is dispersed throughout the continent, they do not have a mother country that could protect them. The Roma are a very heterogeneous people whose identity is multidimensionally diverse (BARANY 2002, pp. 8-15). They are subdivided into countless metagroups, subgroups and further sub-divisions which can be differentiated by socio-economic, cultural, religious, territorial, linguistic and other cleavages. Changing and overlapping identities characterise the Roma population. Many of them identify themselves primarily as members of their own subgroups but also as members of metagroups, as *Roma/Gypsies* and as members of the regional or national majority population. However, many traditional cleavages (like the cleavage between nomadic and sedentary communities) and patterns of identification changed or have even lost their meaning

due to poverty, social mobility, assimilative policies or due to the adaptation of Roma communities to their local ethnic environment. There are individuals and groups with a Roma origin who only declare themselves as members of the regional or national majority (MARUSHIAKOVA and POPOV 1997). Possible reasons are not only adaptation, social mobility and assimilative policies but also the negative stereotypes which are linked with the term *Roma*. The latter has become synonymous with poverty and marginalization. Sometimes, the descent comprises an element of these groups' collective consciousness. In many cases the regional or national majorities do not accept them as members of their groups and distance themselves by means of socio-economic, cultural or other cleavages or by means of specific habits. However, there are also relatively well educated and integrated Roma-communities. Roma-activists who promote a common group consciousness generally identify as *Roma*.

Due to their heterogeneity and the fact that a common Roma-identity does not exist it becomes clear that the Roma are not a usual ethnic group. Nevertheless, they are united by cultural and linguistic origins, similar historical and current experiences of socio-economic and political marginality and by specific patterns of the perception of themselves and their social environment (e.g. a division of the world into the spheres of Roma and Non-Roma) (BARANY 2002, p. 15). So they share important elements of a common group consciousness and of an ethnic identity.



Apart from this it becomes clear that general statements about the Roma's situation cannot be made. Quantitative research methods do not provide reliable data. Suffice it to mention that even the determination of the Roma populations' sizes in their countries is impossible. Official demographic data usually undercount the Roma. Scientific surveys often do not reveal the criteria which are used to identify persons as *Roma* (UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME 2002, pp. 23-25). According to estimates, roughly eight million Roma live in Europe; the majority of them lives in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans (UNDP 2002, pp. 23-24). They are Europe's largest ethnic minority.

Although there are relatively wealthy Roma-communities, the group is "traditionally" one of the continent's poorest and most disadvantaged minorities (see author's photographs: Roma in Southeast Europe). Nevertheless, Roma have always been able to adapt to the wider macro-society. Over long periods of time, members of this ethnic group occupied peripheral economic niches and integrated elements of their environment's cultures and habits. Especially during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the gap between the Roma across Europe and their social environments deepened mainly due to a lack of adaptability to fast-changing socio-economic conditions and due to assimilative policies and discrimination. But which effects did the transformation processes in Eastern Europe have on this specific ethnic group? Did the Roma's living conditions improve or do they live even more on the margins than before? This article is concerned with the characteristics and backgrounds of the situation large marginalized segments of Bulgaria's Roma population are exposed to.

### **Roma in Bulgaria before and after 1989/90**

Bulgaria is a post-socialist country which is inhabited by Roma since the Middle Ages (MARUSHIAKOVA and POPOV 2001, p. 370). The Roma comprise a very large part of this country's entire population. Bulgaria has about 7.8 million inhabitants; experts classify between 500,000 and 700,000 of them as Roma (MARUSHIAKOVA and POPOV 2001, p. 373). Most of them are sedentary like the majority of Eastern Europe's Roma but some communities abide by a semi-nomadic lifestyle. Like anywhere else in Europe,

the Roma are traditionally perceived to be "very different" which is due to sociocultural and religious characteristics and also to their lower social Status. The stereotype of the criminal, lazy and dirty gypsy comprises a historical element of their social environment's perception and fostered assimilative policies. However, Roma worked as craftsmen, provided different forms of unskilled labour and occupied economic niches. For centuries they have been an integral part of the society they lived in (MARUSHIAKOVA and POPOV 2001, pp. 373/374).

Until the collapse of socialism the attitude of the Bulgarian State towards the Roma was not characterised by substantial differences. The political approach was not confrontation but rather condescension vis-à-vis a group which was perceived as an inferior, socially underprivileged, homogeneous Community without specific ethnic characteristics. From the official point of view the Roma did not endanger the interests of the majority population and did not deserve any Special political attention. This traditional attitude explains why Roma were not the primary target group of specific State policies. Political measures regarding this minority were inconsistent, contradictory to their real needs and developed and implemented without their participation. Due to their political and socio-economic marginality the Roma generally remained isolated from mainstream politics.

After a short period of internationalism, the socialist policy towards the Roma was motivated by the perception of their social, economic and cultural backwardness and the fear that Roma with an ethnic Turkish self-consciousness could

be misused as "bridges" of Turkish and Muslim influence and policy. Socialist policies aimed at assimilation and forced economic Integration. In the last phase (since the so-called Process of Revival 1984/85, an assimilative campaign which was primarily directed against the ethnic Turkish and Muslim population of Bulgaria) the authorities even denied the Roma's existence.

The regime managed to raise their Standard of living by means of providing opportunities for education, permanent employment, regular wages, favourable conditions for settlement and access to social Services. Nevertheless, the State socialist System left a Roma minority which kept on occupying the lowest social Status as unskilled workers filling out peripheral niches of the labour market. Its majority lived and still lives in segregated quarters and the children were channelled into segregated schools with a low quality of education. Some Roma quarters were surrounded by high walls. Social isolation and the assimilative policy even strengthened the stereotype of this ethnic groups' inferiority. Repressive assimilation campaigns prevented the public expression of ethno-specific characteristics and caused tensions and mistrust between Roma and State institutions (MARUSHIAKOVA and POPOV 2001, pp. 375-378).

After the collapse of socialism the institutional framework provided a basis for the ethno-specific Organisation and articulation of interests as well as for cultural development and social and political participation. Nevertheless, until the end of the 1990s the Roma did not become the focus of a specialized state policy for the improvement of their li-



ving conditions. Meanwhile, the transition brought new hardship for large segments of this ethnic group. The Roma are confronted with an unemployment rate above average, a decreasing level of education, impoverishment, discrimination, increasing segregation in several spheres of life and severe health problems (SCHÜLER 2005, pp. 59-246).

The majority of the Roma in a working age is unemployed. Due to their low professional qualification most of them are insufficiently prepared for the demands of the transforming labour market. Ethnic discrimination influences the “hiring and firing” of employees. Consequently, large segments of the Roma population are dependent on social welfare which means they are dependent on the scarce state budget. After 1989/90, the Roma’s access to education deteriorated mainly as a consequence of poverty, limited proficiency in the Bulgarian language, the absence of role models showing success through education and segregative elements of the Bulgarian educational system. The low educational level within the younger generations of the Roma population renders their integration into the country’s economic and social life very difficult. This leads to an increasing marginalisation and to a growing social distance between the Roma and the majority population.

With their economic role the Roma also lost the limited acceptance of their social environment. Since the beginning of the transition period large segments of the Roma population are trapped in a vicious circle of poverty and exclusion and are exposed to a “culture of poverty”. Its forms of life and patterns of behaviour like

- a permanent struggle for survival – also by means of semi-legal and illegal strategies like theft
- poor housing conditions in segregated quarters
- having many children
- addiction to drugs
- resignation, culture of dependence on external help and “victim-mentality”
- lacking awareness concerning the importance of education
- different forms of self-exclusion

stand in vast contrast to the norms and values of the majority population. They also differ from the life of traditional Roma-communities which are better off and manage to abide by long standing values and cultural characteristics.

The culture of the underprivileged is an element of the vicious circle of poverty but it is perceived by the social environment as a specific “Roma culture”. Like a “self-fulfilling prophecy” it strengthens the existing prejudices vis-à-vis the ethnic group. The perception suggests that the Roma themselves are guilty of their plight and disregards that they are an ethnic group whose marginality is caused by complex factors including discrimination and a lack of development opportunities. Large segments of the macro-society consider them as lazy, irresponsible criminals who get rich at their environment’s expense and who just do not want to adapt to social values, habits and ways of life.

According to a survey which was conducted by *BBSS Gallup* and the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee in 2005, 67 % of the ethnic Bulgarians do not like to make friends with Roma. 94 % declared their non-acceptance concerning a marriage with a member of the Roma minority.

77 % do not want their children to go to classes in which half of the pupils are Roma. 85 % regard the Roma as lazy and irresponsible and 27 % even do not want to live in the same country with them. On the contrary, 89 % of the Roma declared they could imagine to have ethnic Bulgarian friends; 60 % could imagine a “mixed” marriage. 83.5 % of the Roma recommended educational desegregation (KOEN 2005a, pp. 12/13; KOEN 2005b, pp. 12, 13, 21).

The negative Roma-image fosters the stigmatisation of the ethnic group as a scapegoat for Bulgaria’s socio-economic problems and makes its political, economic and social participation extremely difficult. It also fosters discrimination in all spheres of life including public services, housing and criminal justice. Roma-individuals and even entire communities are sometimes exposed to violent forms of discrimination which are committed by private individuals or groups as well as by the police. Regular reports of non-governmental organisations inside and outside Bulgaria (e.g. Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Amnesty International, European Roma Rights Centre) give full details concerning the extent and the forms of discrimination (SCHÜLER 2005, pp. 116-246).

It becomes clear that after 1989/90, a fast-changing socio-economic environment together with

- educational and socio-economic “backwardness” within the Roma-population
- mechanisms of self-exclusion (due to cultural characteristics and poverty)
- consequences of the Roma’s heterogeneity
- and the existence of historical prejudices and discrimination

have caused the deterioration of their overall conditions. Thus, the democratic changes did not at all foster the Roma’s integration.

### **Bulgaria’s Roma policy (1990-2002)**

Apart from president Zhelev’s (1990-1996) commitment for the fight against discrimination and social problems of the Roma as well as for the establishment of a dialogue with representatives of the ethnic group the Bulgarian governments did not develop a comprehensive Roma policy. In continuity to the traditional political approach the marginality of the Roma was exclusively regarded as a so-





cial problem without ethnic aspects. The importance of the fight against discrimination and the promotion of an equal access to important spheres of life were underestimated.

The political passivity vis-à-vis Roma issues is partly a consequence of their negative social image. Political activism for the sake of this minority is highly unpopular due to the prevalence of prejudices, the enormous social distance between this ethnic group and the majority population and its perception as a burden of the scarce state budget. Thus, political parties or governments which engage in improving the living conditions of the Roma run the risk of losing the appreciation of their potential electorate.

The political passivity also comes from the facts that this minority does not dispose of a common motherland which could be a “protecting power” and that it does not control significant political and economic resources. The demands of the Roma do not contain separatist potentials and do not constitute direct threats to the unity of the nation. These aspects do not incite for political action. Notwithstanding the new opportunities for the organisation and articulation of ethno-specific demands and interests, the Roma do not have strong political parties or commonly accepted spokesmen which could influence Bulgaria’s minority policy on the national level. The main reasons are the group’s heterogeneity, poverty, the severe lack of education and also a lack of historical experiences concerning political mobilization.

Apart from this, the social environment of the Roma also has to cope with unemployment, low wages and pensions and poverty. The governments still have to implement a multitude of political, legal and socio-economic reforms. Thus, the issues of the country’s minorities are one of manifold challenges.

However, the political importance of Roma issues rose by the end of the 1990s. Non-governmental groups contributed to a raising awareness of international organisations. NGOs and human rights activists document cases of ethnic discrimination as well as the dimensions of the Roma’s marginality and criticize the lack of a comprehensive Roma policy. Thus, in 1998 the improvement of this ethnic group’s living conditions became a priority of the accession partnerships between Bulgaria and the European Union. More international criticism



could have endangered the prospect of Bulgaria’s European integration efforts. It is also because of the commitment of Roma-activists for the promotion of ethno-specific characteristics and for an active political participation that the governments could not simply keep on ignoring the existence and the problems of this minority.

Ivan Kostov’s UDF-government which had come to power in April 1997 was the first cabinet that declared the integration of minorities a political priority. Nevertheless, state policies on Roma remained inadequate. Thus, in 1998 the Roma-NGO “Human Rights Project” from Sofia together with two other Roma-organisations and some independent experts on minorities made a first attempt to develop priorities for the future Roma policy.

In spring 1998, the specialists issued a draft programme “for an equal participation of Roma in the social life of Bulgaria”. It recognises the Roma as a disadvantaged ethnic group and emphasizes that discrimination in many spheres of life is the main reason for their marginality. Therefore, it determines the combat of discrimination as the priority of the Bulgarian policy towards Roma and provides for the establishment of a specific state body for the examination and punishment of unequal treatment on a legal basis. In view of the existence of unpunished police misconduct towards Roma it plans the establishment of special commissions for the combat of ethnically motivated police offences. Furthermore the draft proposes general directions that shall promote an equal access to important social and economic resources.





Thus, the desegregation of education, the implementation of measures for professional qualification and the legalisation of illegally built Roma neighbourhoods are guiding principles of the draft for the future Roma-policy.

After discussions with Roma-activists and “ordinary” members of the ethnic group throughout the country, more than seventy Roma organisations declared their support for the draft and the strategy was no longer a document prepared by experts for the Roma. The consensus that had been reached bridged the minority’s cultural and socio-economic heterogeneity (which represents an important obstacle concerning their effective political and social participation). The draft was presented to the government in October 1998 at a national Round Table. Members of supranational

state, provoked disagreements between the Roma working group and refused to commit to concrete actions. The government even tried to isolate the Roma activists from the process of policy making by elaborating its own programme with foreign experts from the Council of Europe. In March 1999 all Roma-organisations which supported the draft of the NGO-activists held a new meeting and declared their non-acceptance of the exclusion of this document from the political decision-making process.

Since the disagreements between the Roma activists and the government were published by the media and since the awareness of international organisations had been raised it became impossible for the state officials to pretend that they reached a consensus. On April 7, 1999 an agreement was signed by the Roma or-

discriminated ethnic group and commits itself to abolish inequality. This implies that the government for the first time ever officially turns from the traditional consideration of Roma issues as mere social problems. With its decision of April 1999 the Council of Ministers agreed to adopt legal and institutional measures for the fight against discrimination (e.g. law on discrimination, specialized state body, antidiscrimination clauses) as a basis of the promotion of an equal access to all spheres of social life. Apart from this, the Framework Programme plans the institutionalized participation of Roma representatives in the process of its implementation.

The political directions stipulated by the Framework Programme did not only meet the approval of Bulgarian experts on minorities. The document was also



organisations and international NGOs, which had been mobilized by the initiators of the programme, were also present and supported the document.

The agreement which was signed by the Deputy Prime Minister and Roma activists obliged the government to negotiate with them in order to produce a final version of the programme.

In the course of the negotiations between a group of Roma representatives and the government on the concepts of the future policy the Roma had to deal with serious setbacks. According to Rumyan Russinov, who led the group of Roma negotiators as programme-director of the Roma-NGO “Human Rights Project”, state officials denied the existence of discrimination and the fact that Bulgaria represents a multi-ethnic

ganisations and the Council of Ministers through which the government agreed to approve the initial draft document after some modifications by a joint commission. On April 22 the government approved the final version of the document, the “Framework Programme for an Equal Integration of Roma in the Bulgarian Society”.

The Framework Programme represents the first political document that has been elaborated on the initiative of Roma and with their direct participation. It provides for long term problem-solving strategies. The period for the elaboration and implementation of concrete projects on the basis of the programmatic principles is scheduled for ten years. With the approval of the Programme the government formally recognizes the Roma as a

welcomed by the international community, e.g. by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance and the European Union, as a basis for a long term improvement of the Roma’s living conditions. It was praised as a symbol of the Bulgarian government’s political will to find effective problem-solving strategies for the benefit of this minority. Thus, Kostov’s cabinet derived an important political benefit from the Framework Programme.

Notwithstanding the international approval, the anti-discrimination provisions of the draft programme have been weakened by the modifications of April 1999. The Framework Programme does not provide for the establishment of a special body treating complaints against police misconduct and it does not con-

tain concrete guiding principles for the protection against racially motivated violence exerted by state officials.

Furthermore, the Framework Programme does not contain an action plan with concrete descriptions of projects, deadlines, durations, responsibilities and informations concerning the amount and the sources of the personal and financial resources which are needed for the implementation. Besides, there are no mechanisms for the evaluation of the implementation process. The document does not have a legal status and therefore its implementation is not legally binding. Consequently the government is not subject to concrete political duties and responsibilities.

Although the implementation of the document represented a medium term priority of the EU-accession partnership of 1999, neither the law on discrimination, which should have been elaborated within one year after the adoption of the programme, nor an institutional mechanism for its implementation had been enforced until the end of 2002. No action plan existed and no special governmental activities for the realisation of the Framework Programme's guiding directions had been implemented (SCHÜLER 2005, pp. 84-106).

For its part, the Council of Ministers made the lack of financial resources a pretext for its inactivity but in fact many programmatic goals (e.g. bringing forward amendments to the penal code) did not depend on significant funding. With the extensive presentation of the Framework Programme on the international level, the implementation of small, fragmentary projects and empty promises concerning the accomplishment of the programmatic goals the cabinets only implemented a symbolic Roma policy. First and foremost it focused on the creation of a positive image abroad.

In view of Bulgaria's aspirations to enter the European Union the governments mainly reacted upon the criticism of international organisations. As a matter of fact, the EU with its abilities to monitor Bulgaria's minority policy and to exert political pressure concerning the Roma's integration played an important role in the realisation of the political directions. Nevertheless, the Commission's Regular Reports on the accession preparations of the country were marked by a lack of detailed statements regarding the implementation process of the Framework

Programme and the government's Roma policy. The Regular Report of 1999 does not contain a differentiated evaluation of the programme's contents. The report of the following year mentions that the cabinet has the political will to improve the living conditions of the Roma population. It registers "some progress" concerning the implementation of the programme but superficially states that "on the whole" the implementation progressed "rather slowly". Although the report of 2001 contains concrete information about the problems Roma have to cope with in several social spheres it simply states that the implementation progress is "very limited" without providing further details. Besides, it does not demand

and Demographic Issues (until 2005 the only state body dealing with minorities) and as local experts within districts and communities. However, there was no legal basis which defined their competences. In fact they acted as administrative consultants, as mediators between local Roma communities and authorities, they provided information about Roma issues and coordinated local projects. The experts were not entitled to require the implementation of the Framework Programme or to influence the policy-making process by taking own, binding decisions. Their abilities for action were dependent on the administrations' will to cooperate. Besides, the experts were appointed and paid by local governors. As



concrete action for the implementation of the programme's goals, such as the elaboration of an action plan (SCHÜLER 2005, pp. 107/108).

Considering the fact that the implementation of the document represented a priority of the accession partnership, a detailed and critical monitoring of Bulgaria's Roma policy, the classification of the Programme as the yardstick for the monitoring process and the consequent demand of the elaboration of an action plan by the EU could have been important incentives for political activism.

Being confronted with the reproach of a wilful delay of the programme's accomplishment the government often pointed to the appointment of Roma experts in state institutions on the central and local level. Members of this minority were really employed as experts on Roma issues in ministries, in the Council on Ethnic

a result of their "political" appointment, their independence was questionable. In fact, the nomination of the Roma experts represented a formal element of a symbolic Roma policy (SCHÜLER 2005, pp. 102-104).

Another reason for the delayed implementation of the Framework Programme was the limited scope for action of the Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues, the state body which was responsible for the coordination of the implementation activities. The Council did not have the status of a ministry. The institution and its local branches were neither entitled to give legally binding instructions concerning the elaboration, implementation and evaluation of concrete Roma projects nor to demand the political implementation of the programme. The improvement of the Council's administrative capacities also represented



a political priority of the EU-accession partnership.

The government Saksoburggotski which had gained the political power in 2001 elaborated a new programme for the minorities which did not specifically focus on the Roma. In October 2001 it issued its government programme "People are the Wealth of Bulgaria" which contains the special section "Integration of Minorities". The section aims at the protection and the promotion of ethnic identities and condemns the lack of an anti-discrimination legislation. Besides, the section stresses the insufficient competences of the National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues. The elaboration of an anti-discrimination law, the

ded for the implementation and concerning the institution that should monitor and control the accomplishment. Indeed, the section "Integration of Minorities" states that the National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues is charged with solving questions concerning the realization of the Framework Programme's guiding principles. It also points at the fact that the institution does not dispose of the competences and administrative capacities for the fulfilment of this task. Yet, the section does not provide any details with regard to concrete powers the Council should be supplied with.

Apart from the guiding-principle of the elaboration of a law against discrimination Saksoburggotski's programme

Roma's access to development opportunities in the spheres of education and employment as well as for the combat of discrimination.

Especially the equalization of educational opportunities by means of integrated education (also at the pre-school level) and the abolishment of the segregated "Roma-schools" play a key role for a successful integration. All measures implemented in this sphere (e.g. forms of material support for the poorest Roma-families, the introduction of school-mediators, the participation of the parents in activities inside and outside their children's schools, the improvement of the integrated schools' infrastructure, the elaboration of teaching manuals, the establishment of a monitoring system regarding the children's learning process etc.) should relate to this long-term objective. The practice of sending normally developed children to special institutions for disabled pupils due to social or linguistic difficulties must be stopped as soon as possible.

The Roma's equal access to integrated education is the *conditio sine qua non* for the improvement of their employment perspectives as well as for their successful mobilization and political and social participation. In this regard, it is also an important precondition for the prevention of the manipulation of the Roma's voting behaviour by unscrupulous and opportunistic mainstream politicians and parties.

Education will enable the Roma to participate more actively in combating the specific problems of large segments of this ethnic group.

In the sphere of employment, the state's policy has to focus on adult education and the improvement of professional skills, on public works projects and the strengthening of the incentives to hire Roma and to seek employment. Besides, the government and NGOs have to raise the Roma's awareness regarding the importance and the benefits of education and employment by means of public campaigns and mediators.

For the combat of discrimination, a comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation with a specific executive body is an important measure but cannot be the only one for the promotion of tolerance. With the help of public information campaigns, the media and schools, people should be informed about human rights and about the historical and cultural cha-



creation of a political, socio-economic and cultural basis for the integration of the country's minorities and the supervision of the Framework Programme's realization represent important political priorities of Saksoburggotski's programme.

However, the contents stipulated in the section on minorities do not give concrete information about the relationship between this document and the Framework Programme. On the one hand the section criticizes the lack of concrete mechanisms for the implementation of the Roma-strategy and the delay concerning its accomplishment and provides for the supervision of its implementation.

This implies that the cabinet considered the realization of the strategy a political aim. On the other hand it does not contain specifications concerning the institutional mechanisms which are nee-

does not refer to the directions of the Framework Programme which provide for the creation of an equal access to different resources and spheres of life. Furthermore it does not foresee the development of an action plan for its implementation. Apart from this, the section "Integration of Minorities" does not fix any political duties for the elaboration of a comprehensive Roma policy (SCHÜLER 2005, pp. 108-116).

### **Policy (2003- 2005), problem-solving strategies and development perspectives**

There are no short-termed solutions for breaking the vicious circle of poverty large segments of the Roma population are trapped in. The most important precondition for the achievement of this goal is the development of a long-termed state policy for the improvement of the

characteristics and the specific problems of minorities. It should be emphasized that the Roma's multidimensional marginality is a "time bomb" which comprises a financial burden for the state budget and contains potentials for social unrests and interethnic tensions. Furthermore it should be explained that the integration of the Roma is in the interest of society as a whole because it can foster

- a declining crime rate
- a financial "recovery" of the social security system
- consumption
- the creation of employment opportunities by Roma
- and the improvement of the interethnic relations.

Tolerance vis-à-vis the Roma and respect for human rights should especially be promoted in law enforcement institutions.

Transparency concerning the management of resources, sustainability and the participation of the target groups in all phases of Roma-related projects should be premises of all policies regarding the ethnic group. Cooperation between the target groups, the local and national governments and the donors regarding the design, the implementation, the evaluation and the financing of the projects is a further prerequisite of a successful Roma-policy. In this regard it is important to improve the impact of the Roma on decision-making especially at the local administrative level.

Further important preconditions for the improvement of the Roma minority's situation are economic recovery, better employment opportunities, the consolidation of the state budget not only at the national but also at the local level and reforms within the social security system which focus on a better inclusion of vulnerable social groups.

Indeed the Bulgarian governments implemented some important reforms:

- An action plan for the implementation of the Framework Programme (October 2003) which covers the period between 2003 and 2004 with descriptions of projects, responsibilities and informations concerning the resources.
- A comprehensive anti-discrimination law with a specific executive body.
- A ministerial strategy for the educational integration of the ethnic minorities with an action plan (2004-2009). It contains descriptions of projects, durations, responsibilities and informa-

tions concerning the amount and the sources of the necessary resources.

- The transformation of the National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues and the establishment of the governmental directorate "Ethnic and Demographic Issues" with more opportunities to influence Roma-related policies.
- The establishment of a fund for the financial support of projects related to educational desegregation.
- The introduction of the international Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015 and the development of an action plan (SCHÜLER 2006, pp. 10 -20).

All these normative and institutional initiatives contain many laudable measures for the improvement of the Roma's living conditions which also relate to the objectives mentioned above. Notwithstanding these efforts which have partly shown positive results, the Bulgarian state still does not implement a comprehensive national policy for the promotion of this minority's equal access to development opportunities in the spheres of education and employment and for the combat of discrimination. In its report for 2004, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee states:

*"As in previous years, there was practically a lack of any state policy aimed at Roma integration"* (BULGARIAN HELSINKI COMMITTEE 2005, p. 16).

Many important measures have been postponed at the political level for quite a long time. Meanwhile the living conditions of large segments of the Roma population have constantly deteriorated. It remains to be seen whether Bulgaria's recent measures concerning the Roma minority are a real basis for a long-term integration.

Lately, violent clashes between Roma and ethnic Bulgarians which are provoked by consequences of poverty, exclusion and prejudices have increased. As a result of the parliamentary elections of 2005, the ultra-nationalist movement "Ataka" (attac) with its leader Volen Siderov managed to enter the National Assembly with more than 8 % of the vote and 21 mandates. The movement had been found only a month before the elections. Its main slogan was "Bulgaria for the Bulgarians!". In its election campaign it evoked images of "Gypsy-criminality", Turkish threats and Jewish conspiracies.

The "surprise" happened in a post-socialist country in which nationalist

parties have never been popular enough to enter the National Assembly and in which the majority population's culture of tolerance concerning ethnic minorities has often been emphasized by the political and intellectual elites.

Notwithstanding the political future of "Ataka", it becomes clear that political and socio-economic transformation processes which go along with

- material insecurities
- changes of values and conditions of life
- a growing social inequality
- the overlap of social and ethnic cleavages
- and real or perceived threats concerning the interests and claims of individuals/groups

are preconditions for the rising importance of ethnic stereotypes and prejudices for inter-group relations, for the identification of scapegoats and for the development of different forms of discrimination vis-à-vis weaker groups. The worst-case scenario can be the establishment of authoritarian regimes.

There is no alternative to the Roma's integration not only in Bulgaria but also in many other European countries where the situation is similar. Evidently a comprehensive, long-termed integration policy is expensive. However, the costs of the political, economic and social consequences of this ethnic group's exclusion are much higher.

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